

FACT SHEET 4

Use of interpreters

April 2009

BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

The Australian community is entitled to effective access to government services. The Australian Public Service values require agencies to deliver services 'fairly, effectively, impartially and courteously to the Australian public and [to be] sensitive to the diversity of the Australian public'. Agencies need to be mindful of the linguistic diversity of the Australian public. Some groups and individuals may have special communication needs.

The Access and Equity Framework, published by the Australian Government in 2006, encourages Australian Government agencies to take a greater leadership role on diversity issues and to promote a whole-of-government approach. The framework encourages agencies to use interpreter services, or to recruit and train staff who have appropriate linguistic and cultural skills. This may be needed for effective communication with clients and members of the public.

Interpreting is the oral rendering of the meaning of the spoken or signed word from one language into another language. An interpreter may be needed to provide interpreting assistance between a client and staff member of a government agency, so that both can understand each other clearly.

Some people are not able to communicate in English with a government official. Others may be able to converse in English but require an interpreter to understand complex information of a technical or legal nature, or during stressful or emotional situations when their command of English may decrease temporarily. An accredited interpreter (accredited through the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) is invaluable in these circumstances.

Correct use of a skilled interpreter ensures the agency receives and provides accurate information, meets its duty of care obligations and can obtain informed consent from clients where required. Both the client and agency can have greater

confidence in each other's understanding of the conversation and the level of service provided. The effective use of interpreters is therefore both an access and equity issue and an important factor in good administrative decision making.

In 2009 the Ombudsman published a report on the use of interpreters, which listed eight best practice principles to inform the use of interpreters by Australian Government agencies.

1. Agency policies on the use of interpreters

Australian Government agencies that provide services to the public should have a clear and comprehensive overarching policy on the use of interpreters that covers all programs and services delivered by the agency, including contracted services. Such a policy should refer to any legislative requirements and specify when agency and contracted staff should use an interpreter, including whenever one is requested by a client or whenever the staff member needs one to communicate effectively with a client (whether formally or informally). The policy should also provide clear steps on how to arrange for an interpreter, including contact details and agency cost codes where applicable. This information should be readily accessible to all agency staff.

2. Promote access to interpreter services

Australian Government agencies should provide a direct link on their website home page to information on interpreter services and other relevant information for non-English speakers, including information translated into other languages.

3. Provide fair, accessible and responsive services

Australian Government agencies should endeavour to provide an interpreter to facilitate communication wherever necessary. Staff should record clients' interpreter needs in the agency's system and plan ahead to meet client needs. If a

request for an interpreter is not met, the reasons for this should be recorded. Staff should be flexible enough to arrange an interpreter if it becomes apparent that assistance is required.

4. Specify who can be used as an interpreter

An Australian Government agency's policy on interpreters should clearly state who should and should not be used as an interpreter. The use of friends, family members and children as interpreters should be avoided. Bilingual and multilingual staff members who hold the required accreditation or equivalent qualification can be used as interpreters, where appropriate. If the agency believes it is not appropriate to use staff as interpreters in some instances, this should be clearly specified in the agency's policy.

5. Provide staff training

All staff involved with client contact should receive practical training in working with interpreters to ensure they are equipped with the required skills to effectively communicate with clients through an interpreter and know how to deal with any sensitivities or conflicts of interest. Staff training should extend to personnel contracted to provide services on the agency's behalf as well as staff providing interpreter services under a community language allowance.

6. Maintain good records

Australian Government agencies should keep a client's record of interpreter needs, including language and dialect, any gender or other

requirements, and whether an interpreter is required for oral and written communication. Where an interpreter is used, staff should record relevant identifying details. Where an interpreter is offered but declined by the client, this should also be recorded.

7. Provide an accessible complaint handling mechanism

Australian Government agencies should have an accessible complaint handling mechanism that allows clients to complain about access to, or the use of, an interpreter, including the quality of interpreting. The complaint handling mechanism should be accessible to clients who do not speak English. Agencies should collect information about complaints and use this data to improve interpreter services. Where a dispute arises over the accuracy of interpreted information, the agency should consider obtaining the information again through another interpreter and reconsider the original decision if appropriate.

8. Promote qualified interpreters

Australian Government agencies should encourage the development of interpreters in emerging languages and work together to provide timely access to qualified interpreters.

FURTHER REFERENCES

- Commonwealth Ombudsman, *Use of interpreters* (Report No. 03/2009), March 2009
- Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Accessible Government Services for All*, 2006 Access and Equity Annual Report, Appendix A

More information?

If you would like copies of other Commonwealth Ombudsman fact sheets, more information about the work of the Ombudsman's office, or a more detailed briefing for agency staff, please contact the Director Public Affairs.

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